

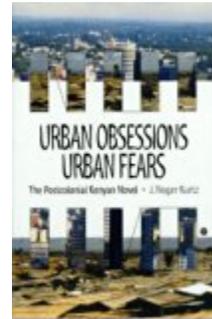
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

J. Roger Kurtz. *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Trenton, New Jersey and Asmara, Ethiopia: Africa World Press, 1998. vii + 228. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86543-657-2.

Reviewed by Tony Simoes da Silva (School of English, Exeter University)

Published on H-AfrLitCine (October, 2000)



J. Roger Kurtz's study of the postcolonial Kenyan novel in English appeared in 1998, a point worth making in so far as it set out to provide a comprehensive listing of texts produced in Kenya up to that date. In that sense the work will inevitably reflect the period of its publication. That said, *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears* is a worthy contribution to the field of criticism in contemporary African studies. Although clearly focused on works written in English, Kurtz contextualises his discussion within a larger framework, addressing also Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writings in Gikuyu. Indeed, the way this book traces Ngugi's 'signature', along with that of Grace Ogot, on the body of contemporary Kenyan writing represents one of its most innovative aspects.

As Kurtz puts it, "It is not overstating the case to state that Ngugi ... single-handedly founded the Kenyan novel" (22). He goes on to point out that the centrality of Ngugi's and Ogot's place in Kenyan writing is best evidenced by the fact that the thematic repertoire they established has repeatedly resurfaced (31). This focus on the first generation of Kenyan writing in English is particularly useful insofar as it allows Kurtz to highlight the crucial shift that has taken place in Anglophone Kenyan writing. As he notes, in the context of his brief analysis of Ngugi's most influential texts, "the strain of socially committed writing that characterized the first generation of Kenyan writing" (27) is increasingly being replaced with a much more consumerist orientation. Kenyan writers today are more likely writing with a market base in sight: "No longer is it assumed that to be a writer is to concern oneself with issues of social justice" (19).

One of the book's main threads is precisely this apparent conflict between serious writing and more popu-

lar streams. But if this is one of the reasons why this is an interesting study of postcolonial novel in English in Kenya, it may also be seen to determine some of Kurtz's more unsettling claims. For instance, when referring to the influence of the Mau Mau events in Kenyan writing, Kurtz remarks, in a tone that suggests a sense of cynical disbelief, that Kenyan writers "have not yet exhausted the topic..." (50). But then, why should they? I can't imagine anything of the kind being said about Jewish writing of the Holocaust, if I may overstress the point.

There is here a sense in which Kurtz's enterprise consists too closely of identifying the authentic Kenyan novel, rather than to explore it in all its complexity. Thus the focus of Nairobi's shocking contrasts between abject poverty and obscene wealth is read as a crucial impetus in the contemporary Kenyan novel, and he writes that "a reading of Kenya novels demonstrates that the city, Nairobi in particular, is where postcolonial society's dynamics are most apparent" (89). Yet, Nairobi's role in Anglophone Kenyan writing is hardly unique to the postcolonial world. The depiction of urban decay and its metonymic ability to speak of moral failure has long been a concern of works using as their backdrop London or Johannesburg, New Delhi or New York. The summary along decades is useful, providing a clear outline of the way the Kenyan novel has grown both in quantity and quality. Paradoxically, the summary of the 1970s along thematic lines conveys most conclusively the uneasiness such an ambitious treatment evokes. Much as Kurtz insists that quantity is not quality, it is quantity that we are offered.

But rather than pointing the finger at Kurtz himself, I would suggest that the real culprit here is a publishing

industry which is clearly less than devoted to supporting writing other than that of a highly marketable quality. Significantly, in Chapter four of his work Kurtz himself details the shifting fortunes of publishing in Kenya, contributing another layer to Bernth Lindfors' treatment of the issue with reference to the wider African context. Moreover, his exploration of Meja Mwangi's writing is handled with great tact and literary insight, as is his decision to foreground the work of contemporary Kenyan women writers such as Muthoni Likimani, Asenath Bole Odaga, Margaret Ogola and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye. Although somewhat uneven in the rushed overview of a large and complex period in modern Kenyan cultural production it provides,

Urban Obsessions Urban Fears represents an invaluable research tool for the Africanist scholar. If only for its concluding listing of scores of Kenyan novels writ-

ten in English, Kurtz's text has opened the doors to a more detailed and nuanced examination of the African novel in English. Overall Kurtz provides a useful and well-researched analysis of the development of Anglophone writing in Kenya, with some illuminating cross-referencing to the situation in Uganda and Tanzania. But I wondered whether Kurtz might have broadened the scope of his project by seeking also to relate Kenyan novels, especially more recent ones such as the work of David Maillu, to European and North American texts of a similar bent. Although he signals such an awareness it is left tantalizingly unexplored.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrlitcine>

Citation: Tony Simoes da Silva. Review of Kurtz, J. Roger, *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. October, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4635>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.